Democratic Socialists of America
Political Education Curriculum

Introduction

The lasting success of DSA depends on widespread political education throughout the organization. Our ability to build a mature, effective socialist movement hinges on broadly shared knowledge of the history and theory of the historical struggle we've inherited. These ideas and conversations belong to the working class. For a multi-tendency organization like DSA, political education provides a space for comradely and productive debate between different political perspectives, allowing us to collectively generate deeper and more effective analyses than any of us could alone. It is our hope that this national curriculum, and future versions, will support political educators in DSA as they bring about a new flowering of socialism in the intellectual and cultural life of our class.

This curriculum is designed to support an introductory Socialist Night School (SNS) with three modular lessons: "What is Capitalism?", "What is Socialism?", and "Why the Working Class?". The readings have been selected to highlight DSA's fundamental political analysis and key political questions, with the goal that any Local, from the newest Organizing Committee to the largest Chapter, can use them as the core of their political education work in order to equip all DSA members with a common base of knowledge. Each reading contains particular political points of view and organizers should encourage critical engagement with those, especially where they may raise fruitful debates.

This document also contains basic facilitation guidelines to ensure that your SNS is not just an opportunity to lecture socialist ideas into the heads of members, but rather as a program of political development that builds skills for socialist organizers: how to talk confidently and in plain-language about key socialist concepts, how to be productive member of a group discussion, how to encourage one another as comrades to participate and ask questions, and how to move a discussion in a way that encourages people to think critically about their own lives and political conditions while applying a materialist, class analysis.

This curriculum was prepared by the National Political Education Committee of DSA (NPEC). The NPEC exists to create the resources and structure necessary to support DSA's political education efforts and to help foster the growth of a new generation of socialists. For DSA to educate its tens of thousands of members, we need a network of political educators, a layer of organizers whose goal is sharing the lessons from past movements and making new members confident enough to draw their own lessons. To this end, we have developed, and will continue to develop a national curriculum; provide training for chapter-level political educators; and host regular national-level speakers and discussions. Please get in touch if you have feedback on this material, if you would like to arrange training or other support for your Local's political education work, or if you would like to volunteer with the NPEC to help build a socialist education program suitable for a mass organization of the entire working class!

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Socialist Night School Tips & Formatting

For political educators planning a new Socialist Night School program, here are a couple of general rules/suggestions and then an example model that you can play around with. Ultimately, you will learn by doing what works the best for you!

► Have a pre-meeting of facilitators (main facilitator plus breakout rooms), and the main presenter if there is one. Discuss the readings together, even if briefly, and discuss what you think are the main arguments that you hope people will spend time on in the meeting. No good meeting is the result of just one person's thought or preparation. And then you can discuss how to structure the meeting to best meet those goals.

► A mini lesson is really just there to open to open up the conversation, and to help include the people who were unable to do the reading. The most important aspect of political education is to get everyone else in the room talking. Usually 10-15 minutes is a good length. Occasionally, a speaker will be especially proficient on a difficult topic, or be more renowned; obviously those are different situations to assess. Slides can be very helpful, especially with cool visuals, but not required. Sometimes people screen a pre-recorded talk! (We are beginning to create a repository of these for chapters to use. For example, two talks on the subject of policing: a 20 minute talk by Rachel Himes on the origins of policing that she did for an NPEC SNS training series and a 30 minute interview with Alex Vitale on *The End Of Policing* from a previous NPEC event). Alternately, try having 3 or 4 people each present on a specific reading, so no one person has to do all the reading and talking!

► There are multiple tools at the facilitator's disposal in the online setting:

Go-arounds of a question or questions that everyone answers. For example, what was your main takeaway from the reading/or the talk? Or, what question came up for you? Or, how would you define X?

Prepared questions for when there are lulls or to kick start a conversation. These can be personal anecdotes that you're soliciting, or more in depth historical/theoretical questions for people. Examples of the former: what makes or made you think of yourself as a Democrat? Or, What (not who...) first got you interested in socialist politics? An example of the latter: what makes capitalism so undemocratic?
In general, go easy on the prepared questions. After all, it is best for the discussion to be around questions people in the group have, as opposed to preconceived ideas. You want to have a balance in any discussion between identifying central arguments for people to grapple with and allowing people to lead the discussion themselves, without allowing it to get too tangential.

Breakout pairs/groups: You can have pairs talk for 5-6 minutes if you know the people, or you can have small groups of 3-5 for up to 10 minutes to just share some initial thoughts or try to answer a question together. (We recommend pairs only if you know everyone because you don't want a situation where someone toxic is alone in a "room" with an unsuspecting comrade). Or you can offer a longer time, 20-30 minutes for groups of 10 or more. It all depends on the size of the group overall. More than 25-30 people in the discussion can mean very little meaningful participation, and a lot of passive listening. So if you have a group of over 30 people, consider longer and larger breakout groups. But if there are 30 or less, maybe smaller share-pairs or grouplets may suffice, and keeping the group together for the bigger discussion could lend

itself to more excitement and depth from a greater range of contributions/thoughts. A short share in a small group can be useful to building a free flowing discussion in the larger group because it helps people feel more confident about what they think or questions they want to raise.

Writing exercises: Ask people to take a few minutes at the beginning or end of a discussion to write down their thoughts about a particular question, their main takeaway, or something new they learned, and then have some people volunteer to share what they wrote.

Connecting points and reiterating questions that have been brought up by people in the discussion can help keep the thread of the conversation going, and can help highlight questions that people should try to answer. It's harder on Zoom to stay concentrated and sometimes people just miss questions or arguments. Reminders things others have said can engage people that otherwise might lose track of the discussion.

- **Formats** can vary but here is one model that is sort of simple and often used:

1) **Introductions.** Explain the format ahead of time and establish some ground rules like comradely behavior, respecting the facilitator, don't use the chat in a way that you wouldn't in an in person meeting, etc. Suggest people put names and pronouns in their "name" label, and have people answer an ice-breaker question in the chat like "What's one hobby you would master if you had the time or resources?".

2) **Presentation.** This can be a short talk by an expert, or (more often) by one or more local political educators that summarizes and contextualizes the readings, especially for people who were not able to complete them. The presentation should be designed to prompt fruitful discussion.

3) **Small breakouts** of 5-6 people. Ask people to write some questions or thoughts down at the end of the breakout before returning to the large group.

4) **Larger group discussion** starting with what people came up with and want to share, then as necessary connect different people's points.

5) **Call to action.** Tell attendees how to get plugged in to chapter organizing/specific WGs or campaigns!

6) **Let the presenter wrap up!** It's a good exercise for any presenter to try to emphasize what they hope everyone learns, or come back to answer some questions that were raised. Having an experienced facilitator wrap up at the end is also a good way to avoid letting the speaker dominate the conversation.

Module 1:
"What is Capitalism?"

Module Preview:

As socialists, we want to transform the world into one that is just, with freedom and equality for all. But rather than begin with the world as we want it to be, we must start with the world as it is, because the state of the world constrains our options and defines the means available to us to create a better world.

Most of us (indeed, the vast majority) are workers, and that means we already have first hand experience of capitalism: the deprivations, the instability, the compulsion to sacrifice hours and hours every day to work for someone else. First, we must understand that these are not individual or unique problems, but problems shared by the whole *working class*.

However, capitalism cannot be fully understood just by looking at experiences that are common to all workers. This is because capitalists rely upon dividing the working class to maintain their control: while collectively we are powerful, divided we are weak. There are many lines along which this division occurs. This module introduces the relationship between capitalism and one such division, racism, which is etched particularly deeply into American life.

Digging into the mechanics of capitalism provides us the tools to dismantle and replace it. Winning socialism is the most ambitious project in history, and we cannot succeed without paying close attention to our opponents and the political, economic, and social terrain. The nature of class society and of specific classes; the way they act and interact; and the material conditions and social relations that structure our lives--all of this is essential knowledge for effective and concrete strategies to build a just society, where everyone is cared for, and all people enjoy freedom and equality.

Reading A:

"But at Least Capitalism Is Free and Democratic, Right?" by Erik Olin Wright

Background:

In this brief piece, Olin Wright takes the common assumption that capitalism grants us freedom and lays out simply how that's not the case. The working class has a "choice," but only between working and starving – and that's no choice at all. And, at work, workers are subject to the whims of their employers, giving over at least eight hours of the day to someone else's control. He also succinctly lays out how governments steward the interests of capital, and how in turn capitalists control the political system.

Discussion Questions:

1. *What does it mean to be free? What does it mean for a society to be a democracy?*
2. *What does Wright mean by the separation between the private and public spheres? How does this manifest in capitalism?*

Reading B:
Excerpt from *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

Background:
This chapter, from a book published in 2016 at the time after the first Black Lives Matter protests, introduces the complex interactions between racism and capitalism in the U.S. Taylor reiterates CLR James' assertion that Black struggles for democratic rights have been at the forefront of the socialist movement in the U.S. In turn, socialists been central to anti-racist struggles. Taylor argues that U.S. ruling classes have used racism and white supremacy, first to justify slavery, then to divide workers. The chapter highlights Marx's statements on slavery, the Civil War, and capitalists' use of ethnicity to divide workers.

Discussion Questions:
1. *What is the relationship between racism/slavery and capitalism?*
2. *What is our strategy for combining anti-racism and class struggle?*
3. *Is the U.S. ruling class still using racism to divide workers?*

Reading C:
"Bourgeois and Proletarians" from *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels

Background:
Written in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, this is one of the foundational texts of the socialist movement. The first chapter covers the expansion of capital and the consolidation of the bourgeoisie as a class, as well as their relationship to the proletariat and their role in history.
Crucial to Marx and Engels understanding of socialism is their appreciation of the power of capitalism, not simply to dominate and exploit, but to create vast amounts of wealth. Prior to capitalism, no society existed that produced enough for every person to not only be fed, clothed and housed, but to enjoy luxuries and meaningful free time. While capitalism is constitutionally incapable of providing a just distribution of this wealth, it has ushered in an era of unprecedented wealth. Because the working class produces this wealth, it is the unique agent of change that can upend this status quo.
The *Manifesto* not only shows capitalism to be a historical phase, and not something that has existed forever, but it also points towards the potential, even the inevitability, that something else will replace it.

Discussion Questions:
1. *Why do Engels and Marx say that class relations have been simplified? What do they mean by that? What're the classes, and what is their relationship?*
2. *Why do Engels and Marx say that the bourgeoisie has "played a most revolutionary part" in history?*
3. *Why is expansion necessary to the bourgeoisie? How is this expansion achieved, and what effects does it have on the proletariat?*
4. *How does the proletariat come into organization and motion? What're the effects of this organization and motion?*

Reading D:
Excerpt from "Understanding Capitalism" by Vivek Chibber

Background:

In this excerpt from his three-part *ABCs of Capitalism*, Chibber lays out the fundamental economic mechanics that structure capitalism, particularly as they contrast with previous modes of economic organization. Understanding these dynamics are essential for socialists. Capitalism is not exploitative *because* capitalists are bad people (although many are), but because the mechanics of the system push the choices of capitalists and workers alike into certain channels based on their material interests. Understanding these pressures allows us to make informed and strategic interventions to shift them in the direction of socialism.

Because of their importance, these basic mechanics have been the subject of constant debate by socialists, often around which of the three key attributes of capitalism Chibber identifies is *most* important: private ownership of the means of production, wage labor, and market dependence. How this is answered leads to different answers to further questions and different approaches to challenging capitalism: Which strikes more directly at the heart of the system, worker ownership or decommodification? Are middle class professionals and small business owners more inclined to cooperation or conflict with the capitalist class? How closely do countries like Norway or Cuba come to socialism, and how do they fall short?

Discussion Questions:

1. *What defines the working class under capitalism? What defines the capitalist class? Why does each act the way it does?*
2. *What is the fundamental relationship between workers and capitalists? How does this shape society in general?*
3. *What are the significant aspects of contemporary capitalism for workers? For consumers? For socialists?*

Module 2:
"What is Socialism?"

Module Preview:

The goal of this module is to discuss what socialism is, what it has meant in the past, and how socialists can build power and grow our movement today.

Ever since ancient times, there have been people fighting for more equality, democracy, and social justice. But the modern political doctrine of socialism and the movements associated with it only emerged in the last few centuries. Since then, socialists have won voting rights, minority rights, worker rights, progressive taxation, welfare states, overthrown colonial rulers, and governed entire countries. Still, we confront an unjustly unequal world between and within countries.

The legacy of the Red Scare and Cold War in America, when socialists and communists were purged from public life and official positions, means that a new generation of activists are redefining socialism. But we insist that it means more than just a new New Deal: workers must own the means of production and run society for themselves.

Socialism cannot be accomplished by philosophers or scientists. The working class can only come to power by its own patient efforts. This will require vibrant social movements, a militant labor movement, strong and democratic socialist organizations like DSA, and elected officials advocating our politics to the public and denouncing the hypocrisy of the ruling class. And we must focus not only on the unfair economic aspects of our capitalist system, but also the legal disenfranchisement of so many in our society and the interpersonal bigotry that comes with it.

Reading A:

"Democratic socialism, explained by a democratic socialist" by Meagan Day

Background:

Meagan Day, a DSA member and staff writer for *Jacobin*, wrote this essay in *Vox* to explain the goals of democratic socialism and respond to common misconceptions about democratic socialists. In 2018, the primary win of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the Bronx brought democratic socialism into the limelight of mainstream political commentary, creating misconceptions about the goals of rapidly growing organizations like DSA.

Discussion Questions:

1. *What are some of the misconceptions floating around the term "democratic socialism"?*
2. *How do democratic socialists differentiate themselves from "New Deal" liberals?*
3. *How do big reforms like Medicare for All expand democracy in daily life?*
4. *How do big reforms fit into the larger project of dismantling capitalism?*

Reading B:
"Building Socialism from Below: Popular Power and the State" by Ben Tarnoff

Background:
Responding to the swelling socialist movement, Tarnoff builds on the work of Nicos Poulantzas and "Eurocommunism" to illustrate how growing a socialist movement requires both competing within the institutions of the state (for example through elections) and developing an autonomous layer of "people power" to act on the state.

Discussion Questions:
1. *Tarnoff talks about the US left's impulse to "just do something." Can you think of an example where the US left has responded to a crisis in a way that was mostly reactive? What could the US left have done in that instance?*
2. *According to Tarnoff, Socialism requires a layer of groups that are autonomous of the State. Why does Tarnoff say that autonomous layer is required?*
3. *If the autonomous layer of working class "popular power" groups contain the seeds of Socialism, can you name such a group that can become an institution under Socialism? What might this group look like within a true Socialist system?*
4. *If today's struggles are about social reproduction (people's need to reproduce themselves and their society), then what direction does that suggest for Socialists? How can we focus on this crisis in social reproduction -- what might social reproduction look like within a Socialist system?*

Reading C:
"Liberalism, Ultraleftism or Mass Action" (Abridged) by Peter Camejo

Background:
Before he was a future vice-presidential candidate, Peter Camejo lambasted the liberals and ultraleftist in this speech to the Young Socialist Alliance in 1970. Camejo was responding to the frustrated segment of the late '60's left that had resorted to only using direct action to force intervention by ruling elites while forgetting to build a mass movement amongst the working class.

Discussion Questions:
1. *Do you think Camejo's 3 orientations accurately describe strategies of change?*
2. *What similarities do you see between the socialist movement Camejo was describing and ours and what has changed since the speech in 1970?*
3. *Why is "mass action" a more effective strategy for change than ultra leftism and liberalism?*
4. *How will calling for concrete demands and not abstract reforms help build a mass movement. What are the differences between the two?*

Reading D:
"Struggle for Democratic Socialism" by Angela Davis (Transcript)

Background:
Angela Davis is giving a plenary speech at a summit of United States socialist groups as well as international guests from the South African Communist Party, Brazil's Workers Party, and Party of Democratic Socialism. In this speech she emphasizes the intergenerational efforts of socialists in the US and abroad, and the broadening of socialist politics to include priorities outside organizing workers, anchoring it all in a international scope.

Discussion Questions:
1. *Why does Davis mock "radical political attention" and emphasize the "intersections"?*
2. *What are ways that we can show international solidarity and why does internationalism matter?*
3. *Does intergenerational knowledge matter or have a real impact for us in the socialist movement?*
4. *Davis criticized the way that socialists (at this period of time) had absorbed some ideas of neoliberals and conservatives—specifically regarding police and prisons—how could this have happened, and how does the course get corrected? Should it?*
5. *How should we assume Davis's "radical oppositional posture"?*

Reading E:
"The Two Souls of Socialism" by Hal Draper

Background:
Hal Draper was an activist in Berkeley, California who authored many pieces on socialism and Marxist thought. This piece was originally published in a student magazine that circulated during his time in the movement. Draper counterposes Socialism-from-Above and Socialism-from-Below, seeing the only way that society can achieve true socialism is by the working class fight for themselves to achieve emancipation.

Discussion Questions:
1. *Draper lays out the 6 strains of Socialism-from-Above--can we identify any of these in our lives?*
2. *How do we change society from below like Draper says? Can this be done by an organization like DSA?*
3. *"We can recruit our ranks from those classes only which have enjoyed a pretty good education; that is,from the universities and from the commercial class." Why does Draper bring up this quote by Engels? What is the (potential) prescription that Draper has?*
4. *Why can't we do socialism-from-above? Why wouldn't it work?*
5. *Is socialism inherently democratic?*

Module 3:
"Why the Working Class?"

Module Preview:

The goal of this module is to discuss why organizing the working class is central to advancing democratic socialism.

By understanding classes under capitalism as a set of relationships between social groups (rather than a set of attributes such as income level, education, or cultural affinity), socialists identify who is on which side of the fence in capitalism. (See this 2-min video, What Is Class for background on the socialist definition of class).

This lesson takes up what makes the working class uniquely capable of and willing to confront capitalism. It is not because we are a majority (we are) or because we are the most oppressed and exploited (we are) but because of our central role to capitalism. The benefits accrued by the capitalist class are *causally linked* to the exploitation of the working class. Therefore, as Viviek Chibber succinctly puts it, the working class has the leverage to change the world because "capitalists can only make their profits if workers show up to work every day, and if they refuse to play along, the profits dry up overnight."

Finally, working class struggle is also essential to liberation of all sorts. Capitalists not only exploit us, but they also dominate us politically and socially to ensure their continued power and prosperity. As Ellen Meiksins-Woods and Sara Nelson each argue, the only path out of this relationship is a collective struggle to end political, social *and* economic exploitation.

Reading A:

"Why the working class?" by Vivek Chibber

Background:

Vivek Chibber, a socialist and professor of sociology at NYU wrote this article for *Jacobin* in 2016 and in it he argues that workers should be at the center of socialist politics because they alone have the power to challenge capitalism.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Why does capitalism fail to meet the material needs of a majority of people?*
2. *Why is the working class uniquely positioned to challenge the capitalist class?*
3. *How do people in society, at your workplace, in DSA, talk about the working class, if at all? Why do you think that is?*
4. *What are ways DSA does or does not put the working class at the center of its politics?*
5. *What are examples of political efforts that center the working class?*

Reading B:
"Why Class Struggle Is Central" by Ellen Meiksins Wood

Background:
Ellen Meiksins Wood was a Marxist historian. In this article from 1987, she asks two questions: Is class central to socialism? And should socialism be our goal? At the time, the organized socialist movement was very weak, and new social movements for racial, gender, and sexual equality were taking its place. So Meiksins Wood makes the argument that the working class is essential for achieving socialism, despite setbacks, difficulties, and failures.
As opposed to a vision of socialism that says socialism is merely the unification of diverse movements for social justice, Wood wants us to understand that socialism encompasses these movements but also goes beyond them -- to attack capitalism at its foundation.

Discussion Questions:
1. *Is socialism impossible if workers do not support socialism right now? Why or why not?*
2. *Why do we need to identify a group in society that can achieve socialism?*
3. *How is our capitalist society founded on class oppression? What are other types of oppression and what is their relationship to class?*
4. *How does capitalism "use" social categories like gender and race?*
5. *Why does Meiksins Wood say that socialism is the "most potentially emancipatory" political project there is?*

Reading C:
"Solidarity is a Force Stronger than Gravity" by Sara Nelson (Transcript)

Background:
Sara Nelson is the International President of the Association of Flight Attendants and a prominent progressive labor leader. In the summer of 2019, she addressed DSA's largest ever Convention, which occurred during a surprising wave of strikes by teachers, hotel workers, and others. Much of the convention revolved around the power of the working class when we organize -- which is what Nelson spoke about.
Nelson draws on diverse stories throughout the U.S.'s history to show how organizing at work not only improves people's lives, individually and as a group but that rather than being just another form of activism, labor organizing is our most powerful weapon.

Discussion Questions:
1. *Why is it important to learn about the labor movement's past? Think of some examples of successful working-class organizing.*
2. *How can we overcome "the law, the political environment, and the economy"? In other words, where does change come from?*
3. *What does Nelson mean by "using power builds power"?*
4. *What is solidarity and why is it so important? Why can having a union lead people to fight for each other despite their differences?*

Reading D:
"Wage Labour and Capital" by Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels

Background:

In this pamphlet Marx and Engles make the case that capitalism itself puts the worker's interests at odds with the capitalists'. They say that the basic economic premise of the system is *the exploitative relationship between the capitalist bosses and the workers*, leading to constant class conflict.
If you don't have much time to read, or you haven't read much Marx before and find him hard to understand, you can first check out this one page primer summarizing the pamphlet's key arguments.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Why does the distinction between labor and labor-power matter? How might it help us understand class definitions and class relations better?*
2. *Why is the relationship between capitalists and the working class necessarily antagonistic?*
3. *History has borne out Marx's assertion that capital grows exponentially over time. But some argue that the conditions of working class life today is better. Do you agree? If you do, does that contradict Marx?*